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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1336
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1203
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 1772
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0758
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAAIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000354

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, OES FOR PATRICK HUDAQ AND AARON SALZBERG
TASHKENT ALSO FOR ESTH REGIONAL OFFICER STEVE PROHASKA
USAID/W FOR EE/AA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PBTS FWWT SENV TX
SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: NEIGHBORS APPEAR TO COOPERATE AT
OSCE MARITIME COOPERATION CONFERENCE

REF: 07 ASHGABAT 0968

¶1. Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (U) SUMMARY: At an OSCE conference on maritime security and environmental cooperation, participants attended presentations on ecological, transit, and trafficking/smuggling issues. The EU said that its "Special Strategy for Central Asia" is a sign of Central Asia's importance and is donating 766.5 million euros for environmental projects in the region. Turkmen officials stated that the Caspian littoral states are working as a group to reach agreements on the Caspian, and suggested that a gas pipeline underneath the Caspian could be built regardless of its location in a zone of seismic activity. It appears that Turkmenistan is serious about working inter-regionally, and about dealing with environmental issues. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (U) During a March 6-7 OSCE Economic Dimension conference in Ashgabat, participants from all OSCE participating states focused on issues concerning economic and environmental aspects related to maritime and inland waterways, and problems faced by landlocked countries. Participants attended presentations on:

- regional management of marine ecological resources and combating maritime and land-based pollution and the introduction of alien species by ballast waters;
- the impact on environment of economic activities such as transport and oil and gas extraction (including responses to oil spills);
- transporting dangerous goods;
- gaps in river basin management;
- bottlenecks at customs checkpoints and border crossings; and
- combating trafficking and smuggling.

EUROPEAN UNION PRIORITIES IN REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

¶4. (U) European Union (EU) Special Representative for Central Asia Ambassador Pierre Morel, one of the speakers, said that "the 'EU Special Strategy for Central Asia' is a signal from the EU of the importance of Central Asia." Morel highlighted fair access to water resources as a worldwide challenge. Specific EU priorities in Central Asia include:

- Implementation of the Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central Asia component of the EU Water Initiative for safe water supply and sanitation and integrated water resources management;
- Management of the transboundary river basin and regional cooperation under the Caspian Sea Environmental Convention;
- Integrated management of surface and underground transboundary water resources, and introduction of more efficient water use techniques such as irrigation;
- Enhanced cooperation for financing water related infrastructure projects through international financial institutions and public-private partnerships;
- Regional integrated water management and hydropower production capacity building;
- Introduction and implementation of the Kyoto Protocol mechanisms;
- Combating desertification and safeguarding bio-diversity, including implementation of the UN Conventions on Biological Biodiversity and Combating Desertification;
- Improvement of sustainable management of forests and other natural resources, under the Forest Law Enforcement and Governance Ministerial process; and
- Increased environmental awareness and development of environmental civil society through cooperation with the

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Central Asia Regional Environment Center.

¶5. (U) To promote these priorities, the EU is providing 750 million euros (during 2007-2013) to deal with Central Asian environmental concerns. Morel announced the European Commission is also providing 15 million euros for Central Asia projects related to the EU Water Initiative, and added that the European Parliament allocated a supplement of 1.5 million euros for water management and environment projects in Central Asia.

DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS MEREDOV SPEAKS

¶6. (U) Turkmenistan's Deputy Chairman of Foreign Affairs Rashit Meredov said his government must consider maritime issues when speaking about the new North-South Rail Line, because it travels along the Caspian Sea. Another of President Berdimuhamedov's major initiatives is to utilize Caspian Sea routes more effectively, and therefore improvement of the Turkmenbashi City seaport and the tanker fleet is also a priority. Meredov named the Framework Convention for Maritime Protection (ratified by all five Central Asian countries), the Nuclear Free Zone Convention, and the Central Asian Commission on Sustainable Development (which was signed in Ashgabat) as important regional environmental agreements.

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE ON SEISMIC ACTIVITY AND PIPELINES

¶7. (SBU) Responding to a question about the wisdom of building a gas pipeline across the Caspian Sea -- in an area of seismic activity -- Turkmenistan's Deputy Foreign Minister for Caspian Sea Issues, Khoshgeldi Babayev, said that there is a precedence of other pipelines built in areas of seismic activity. Acknowledging that the littoral states are discussing this amongst themselves because the ecological issues associated with this pipeline are a concern, Babayev added that Turkmenistan would take international experience and standards -- as well as independent expertise -- into account when planning any pipeline along the Caspian.

¶8. (SBU) Stating that coordination is most important in the Caspian because it is a closed waterway, Babayev maintained that the Caspian littoral states actively cooperate in all Caspian Sea issues. He cited the October 2007 presidential summit in Tehran as one example. According to Babayev, the presidents agreed at this meeting to hold an annual economic forum. He added that northern states may have made more progress than southern states in environmental protection, but "we should learn from each other."

INTERESTING COMMENTS FROM THE MINISTER OF NATURE PROTECTION

¶9. (SBU) Turkmenistan's Minister of Nature Protection, Magtymguly Akmuradov, said that the environmental health of the Caspian Sea is vital because of its exclusive biodiversity reserves, including the well-known example of sturgeon. Responsibility for the Caspian's well-being lies with all of the littoral states. The Government of Turkmenistan is devotin \$1 billion to make ecological improvements on a Turkmenbashy gas processing facility. After digressing to plug Turkmenistan's new Avaza tourism development zone (reftel) as "an event of international importance," he was brought back to the topic at hand by a question about an inventory of alien species in the Caspian Sea. Akmuradov responded that it is a good idea and agreed that Turkmenistan should develop such an inventory, since no such study exists.

SEALS: POINT OF CONTENTION FOR KAZAKHSTAN AND TURKMENISTAN

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¶10. (SBU) Head of Administration of International Cooperation of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Environmental Protection Galiya Karibzhanova noted that seals were dying in the Caspian Sea from illnesses that Kazakh scientists have identified. Not denying Karibzhanova's allegations, Akmuradov said that his employees are working closely with counterparts in Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Azerbaijan. While no one could fully explain the death of these seals, these deaths are 90% attributable to climate change. He alleged that cold water is a kind of antiseptic for baby seals, which allows the seals to develop their immunity to disease, and warming Caspian waters are preventing baby seals' immune systems from developing.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: Long isolated from international fora under former President Niyazov, Turkmenistan enjoys hosting these international events because of the prestige and exposure it gains. But such events are also positive because they allow Turkmenistan's officials -- long isolated as a result of former President Niyazov's policies -- a chance to hear first-hand the international community's concerns about these issues not just in the Caspian, but also in the larger world -- and about the ways others are going about resolving these issues. The public disagreement with the Government of Kazakhstan representative is also a fascinating look into inter-regional disagreement playing out in a public give-and-take. We are pleased that Turkmenistan seems to be serious about increasing its participation in such fora -- and hope that this participation will eventually lead to an increased attention being paid to environmental issues. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND